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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

July 19, 2011

The Honorable Leon Panetta
Secretary of Defense
The Pentagon Rm 3E 880
Washington DC 20301

Dear Secretary Panetta,

I write today concerning the U.S. mission in Afghanistan and Pakistan. My amendment, which gives the secretary of Defense the authority to establish an Afghanistan/Pakistan (Af/Pak) Study Group, was included in the House-passed FY 2012 Defense Appropriations bill. I pressed for the amendment because I believe fresh eyes are needed now to examine the situation on the ground and the overall U.S. mission.

I envision the Af/Pak Study Group being modeled after the Iraq Study Group (ISG). Both you and your predecessor Bob Gates served on the ISG and know better than most the benefits it provided after three years of fighting in Iraq. Now that the U.S. is in its 10th year in Afghanistan, I believe a similar effort is necessary.

Before he was appointed as ambassador to Afghanistan, Ryan Crocker supported creating an Af/Pak Study Group, along with Ambassador Ronald Neumann and Jim Dobbins from the RAND Corporation. American men and women are fighting and dying in Afghanistan. If we are asking them to put their lives on the line daily, I believe we have an obligation to provide an independent evaluation of the U.S. mission. We owe our military forces nothing less.

I do not have the answers. But as you know, there is a movement building in Congress in favor of pulling troops out of Afghanistan. An amendment offered by Rep. Jim McGovern earlier this year to the National Defense Authorization Act to accelerate U.S. departure from Afghanistan was narrowly defeated 204-215. If six members had changed their vote, the amendment would have passed. I have talked to several members who voted against the McGovern amendment who are seriously concerned about the war in Afghanistan and could change their vote if the situation on the ground does not improve rapidly.

I also believe it is critical that Afghanistan be examined in tandem with the facts on the ground in Pakistan. It is clear that in order to be successful in Afghanistan, we must have a clear understanding of how Pakistan is influencing U.S. operations. Just look at the recent news from the region. Hamid Karzai's half-brother was murdered and his funeral bombed, Karai advisor Jan Mohammed Kahn was murdered, and militants attacked and laid siege to

the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul. The enclosed article printed recently in the *Washington Post* states, "...optimism and energy vanished long ago, gradually replaced by cynicism and fear. The trappings of democracy remained in place...but the politics of ethnic dog fights, tribal feuds and personal patronage continued to prevail."

The men and women serving in Afghanistan deserve to have fresh eyes look at this region as soon as possible. With House passage of the A/Pak amendment, I ask that you use your authority as secretary and move quickly to create this study group. I have discussed my amendment with John Hamre at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and he has offered to coordinate the group with professionals with a wide range of expertise.

I would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you to discuss this important initiative and look forward to working with you to ensure we are successful in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Best wishes.

Sincerely,

Frank R. Wolf
Member of Congress

FRW:cw
enclosure
cc: Joint Chiefs of Staff

Thank You

Washington Post
July 17, 2011

Dysfunction and dread in Kabul

Correspondent Pamela Constable on how corruption and malaise are the real threats to Afghanistan now

Kabul, a place I once called home, has become a city of security barriers and fantasy palaces.

I can't find my old house, my old street or the bakery where I used to watch the early-morning ritual of men slapping dough into hot ovens beneath the floor. They've all vanished behind a high-security superstructure of barricades and barbed wire, a foreign architecture of war. Elsewhere in the Afghan capital, a parallel construction boom is underway. The slapdash sprawl of nouveau riche development has sprouted modern apartment buildings, glass-plated shopping centers, wedding halls with fairy lights, and gaudy mansions with gold swan faucets and Greco-Roman balustrades, commissioned by wealthy men with many bodyguards and no taxable income.

Both of these facades are conspiring to cover up the past, paving over the rubble and the lessons of war, distancing ordinary people from the local elites and the bunkered foreigners alike. Most tragically, they are erasing the hope and the promise of change that burst forth in Afghanistan's post-Taliban liberation nearly a decade ago.

I was privileged to witness that awakening and to experience the exhilaration of a society being given a new chance after a generation of war and ideological whiplash. In those early years, I met Afghan exiles who had given up careers in Germany or Australia to participate in their homeland's renaissance, and American jurists and agronomists who had come to help rebuild an alien land.

Foreigners were welcome everywhere, and a new generation of Afghans was in a hurry to catch up. In the cities, I met girls who led exercise classes and boys who took computer lessons at dawn. In rural areas, women still hid behind curtains and veils, but schools reopened in tents, and mud-choked irrigation canals were cleaned. In 2004, long lines of villagers proudly flashed their ink-dipped thumbs after voting in the country's first real democratic election.

That optimism and energy vanished long ago, gradually replaced by cynicism and fear. The trappings of democracy remained in place, propped up by a vast international apparatus, but the politics of ethnic dogfights, tribal feuds and personal patronage continued to prevail. Government agencies were awarded to ethnic factions as fiefdoms for petty extortion. Aid money vanished into powerful pockets, and the once-moribund drug trade flourished.

The parliament became a gallery of old Islamist militia bosses and new war racketeers, locked in crippling disputes with the executive. The 2009 presidential election, a fraudulent parody, was ultimately accepted by international officials because it left the more familiar devil, President Hamid Karzai, in power as Washington prepared to ratchet up the war effort.

As corruption and malaise spread throughout the Karzai government, Taliban aggression and influence filled the void. As the countryside became more vulnerable, foreign aid projects shrank, and tea with tribal elders gave way to convoys of monster vehicles and helmeted warriors kicking in doors. As the gulf between Western intentions and public perceptions widened, Karzai made it worse by denouncing NATO bombings but ignoring Taliban beheadings, in the vain hope that his fellow tribesmen would return to the fold.

The disillusionment worked both ways. By the time President Obama ordered a high-profile civilian and military surge in 2009, hundreds of frustrated American mentors and aid workers had lost heart or left. A Western lawyer who worked with

Afghan anti-corruption officials told me recently that "even the most promising few people I was training turned out to be corrupt." And a woman working to improve rural services said, "I still have to practically force officials in Kabul to pick up the phone or visit the provinces."

Even U.S. Ambassador Karl Eikenberry, usually upbeat and polite, was goaded to an emotional outburst last month by Karzai's suggestion that Western forces — who have lost more than 2,500 lives fighting the Taliban and training Afghan troops since 2001 — were "using" Afghanistan for their own interests and could be viewed as unwelcome occupiers. In a June 20 speech, Eikenberry warned that such "hurtful" comments could cause Americans to grow "weary" of the Afghan effort and demand that all U.S. troops return home.

Psychologically, though, the withdrawal is well underway. Despite assurances by Eikenberry and other officials that the United States will maintain a robust presence after most of its fighting forces leave by 2014, many Afghans believe that the end is near. After 1989, the last time a great foreign power pulled out, civil war soon erupted, and Afghanistan nearly destroyed itself. No one knows what will happen this time, but everyone is bracing for the worst. As one American diplomat said last month, "In their hearts they want us to leave, but in their heads they want us to stay."

Already, there is a growing sense of order unraveling. The assassination Tuesday of the president's half-brother Ahmed Wali Karzai — a powerful and controversial man with many enemies — is an example of the brutal pre-transition power struggle. There have been other signs of trouble, such as the missing Central Bank president who surfaced in Northern Virginia last month, saying he feared for his life after exposing high-level official involvement in a private banking scandal.

The Taliban, in a spectacular attack that mocked months of hopeful rhetoric about a nascent peace process, sent a suicide squad on June 28 to lay siege to an iconic hotel on a hill overlooking the capital. Afghan forces were unable to stop them after a night-long battle, requiring NATO gunships to blast the remaining assailants from the hotel roof. Even in the heavily policed capital, Afghans were unprepared to protect themselves.

In many ways, though, the great battle for the country's future is not the one NATO and Afghan troops are waging against Islamist insurgents in far-flung provinces such as Konar and Khost. It is the messier struggle for money and power taking place in urban centers such as Kabul and Kandahar, where old ethnic rivals are settling scores and new mafia barons are fighting to establish turf.

It includes the scandal of Kabul Bank, whose officers and rich shareholders casually "borrowed" nearly $1 billion of depositors' money to invest in private schemes. It is set amid a self-defeating culture that romanticizes past exploits and yearns for revenge rather than reaching for opportunities. It is a fight with few heroes and no principles at stake, only the spoils of war and drugs.

The real tragedy of Afghanistan is how little advantage it has taken of the enormous international goodwill that followed the defeat of the Taliban in 2001. Showered with far too much aid, clever Afghans have learned to imitate Western jargon, skim project funds and put their relatives on the payroll — while many show little interest in learning the modern skills that would propel their country forward. At its core, this remains a society of tribal values and survival instincts. Goals such as democracy and nationhood come much further down the list.

Today, stuck in Kabul's rush-hour traffic, I marvel at the blinding video billboards, the ATMs, the supermarkets filled with cat food, tin foil and other items unknown here a decade ago. Like everyone else, I also curse at the roadblocks and detours, the trunk searches, the militarization of daily life.

I sometimes think back to the Taliban era, when the same streets were empty, shops were shuttered, and the only sound was the jingle of a passing horse cart. Life was harder then, isolated and primitive. But often, I hear Afghans complain that everything today is chaotic and corrupt. At least under Taliban rule, people say, there was safety and order and Islam. They may not want to return to that era, but they dread what lies ahead.

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Pamela Constable has reported frequently from Afghanistan for The Washington Post since 1998. She is the author of "Playing With Fire: Pakistan at War With Itself."